Ideology and Language Identity: a Buddhist Perspective

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Cultures evolve on the basis of ideologies that they cherish. These ideologies govern different aspects of that culture and guide socio-cultural behaviour of that society. In this process of culture formation, members of that particular society create cultural symbols manifesting their ideology and asserting its distinct identity. When a new ideology emerges in the same environment, it engages with the previously established ideology in a complex manner. It challenges the identity symbols of the established ideology and tries to assert its own identity by creating new symbols.

Language as a powerful means of communicating ideology plays an important role in this process. Language identity assumes greater significance in Indian context, as it not only pervades the social, the cultural, the religious affairs of the society; but even goes beyond that. The present paper is an attempt to understand the relation between ideology and language identity from the Buddhist perspective. It tries to point out how Buddhists starting from their founder Gautama, the Buddha (6th cent. B. C.) challenged Brahmanic ideology by challenging its identity symbols, especially with respect to language. It will also try to find out how this process evolved throughout the history of Buddhism and how it continues even in the modern age in the changing environment.

Part I: Sanskrit: An Identity Symbol of the Brahmanical Culture

I.1. Sanskrit as the Only Medium of Vedic Wisdom

In an ancient Indian context, Vedas were considered to be the storehouse of knowledge and their medium was Sanskrit.[1] The Vedas were regarded as *apauruṣeya* 'not created by a human being'. They were neither open to translation nor to the change of even a single syllable in their texts. Thus, Sanskrit became inalienable from the Vedas and its knowledge became mandatory for the discernment of the Vedas.

I.2. Parochial Nature of Sanskrit

According to the viewpoint of the Vedic tradition, the ultimate liberation of the mankind is possible only through the knowledge of the *Veda*s. In a society based on caste hierarchy, only the *Brāhmaṇa*s, the *Kṣatriya*s and the *Vaiśya*s could study the *Veda*s. However, in the period of the Bhagavadgītā, *Vaiśya*s were regarded at par with women and Śūdras and, possibly, were not entitled to study Vedas. It is said in the Bhagavadgītā:

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[1] The word "Sanskrit" is used here to denote the language of the Vedic scriptures, although it may not be used in respect of the language of the Vedas, in the strict sense of the term. Cf. T. Burrow, The Sanskrit Language, p. (?).

"For those who take refuge in me, O Pārtha, though they are lowly born, women, the *Vaiśya*s as well as the *Śūdra*s, they also attain the highest goal". (9.32)[1]

Later in the medieval period, the notion of two *varṇa*s came into being: *kalāv ādyantayos sthitiḥ*. As a result, even the *Kṣatriya*s were not entitled to study them.

Thus, due to the inseparability of Sanskrit from the Vedas, even its use was confined to the upper classes of the society giving it the status of a parochial language.

I.3. Glorification of Sanskrit as a Sacred Language

In the Vedic culture, Sanskrit was given a paramount status of a sacred language. It was called *Divyā vāk* 'the divine speech'. The Vedic tradition laid an over emphasis on the phonetic expression. Special efforts were made to preserve the sanctity of the Vedas by ensuring correct pronunciation and an immaculate accent. The sciences of grammar and phonetics (*Śikṣā*s and *Prātiśākhya*s) were developed for this very purpose. The protection of the *Veda*s was their chief goal.[2] Any mistake in the pronunciation of the *Veda*s is said to be liable to expiation.[3] This has created an aura of mysticism and fear around the Sanskrit language. Thus, the Sanskrit language became the monopoly of the priestly community.

I.4. Sanskrit as a Means of Merit and Salvation

The Vedic tradition also put forward the view that Sanskrit words are the means to earn merit. Patañjali (2nd century B.C.), the author of the Vyākaraṇa Mahābhāṣya, the celebrated commentary on Pāṇini's Aṣṭādhyāyī, upheld this view. It was said:

"Even a single (correct) word well understood and rightly used, yields one's desire in heaven"[4] (MBh 6.1).

Bhartṛhari (5th century A.D.) in his Vākyapadīya, a text on the philosophy of language, put forth the theory of *Śabdabrahman* and declared grammar as the door to salvation through the knowledge and use of grammatically correct speech.[5] Thus, the role of Sanskrit was extended from expressing meaning to the earning of not only merit but also salvation.

I.5. Sanskrit as a Symbol of High Status

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1 *māṁ hi pārtha vyapāśritya ye'pi syuḥ pāpayonayaḥ / striyo vaiśyās tathā śūdrās te'pi yānti parāṁ gatim //*

2 *rakṣohāgamalaghvasandehāḥ prayojanam / rakṣārthaṁ vedānām adhyeyaṁ vyākaraṇam /* (MBh I.1.1, p.9)

3 *yājñikāḥ paṭhanti / āhitāgnir apaśabdaṁ prayujya prāyaścittīyāṁ sārasvatīm iṣṭiṁ nirvaped iti / prāyaścittīyā mā bhūmety adhyeyaṁ vyākaraṇam /* (Mbh I.1.1, p.10)

4 *ekaḥ śabdaḥ samyag jñātaḥ samyak prayuktaḥ svarge loke ca kāmadhug bhavati /* (Mbh 6.1.84)

5 *idam ādyam padasthānaṁ siddhisopānaparvaṇām / iyaṁ sā mokṣamāṇānām ajihmā rājapaddhatiḥ //* (I.16)

Patañjali enumerates a number of purposes of studying grammar. According to him, one should study Sanskrit grammar for distinguishing himself from the *mlecchas* and women.[1] For him, the use of the standard speech i.e. Sanskrit is a parameter for distinguishing learned people '*śiṣṭas*' from the rest. Thus, Sanskrit was also associated with the social status.

I.6. Derogatory Approach towards Languages of the Masses

Sanskrit grammarians have used terms like *śabda* and *sādhuśabda* to denote the standard speech i.e. Sanskrit. The terms such as *asādhuśabda*, *apaśabda* and *apabhraṁśa*, which possess a derogatory sense, were used to denote an incorrect speech i.e. the languages of the masses and not of the elites of those days. This shows that Sanskrit was held superior to other popular languages. The emphasis laid on the proper language represents the ego of high-class people towards their caste, class, family, and gender. This might be one of the reasons for a norm laid down in the Nāṭyaśāstra, according to which the inferior characters and women in Sanskrit plays speak Prakrit and not Sanskrit.[2]

From the above discussion, it is quite evident that the Vedic tradition that was predominantly ritualistic and puritan and was based on the ideology of graded inequality glorified Sanskrit as a divine and mystic language and a means to earn merit and salvation. It attached greater significance to the outer form of the language in the form of correct pronunciation than its contents or, the intention behind it. Sanskrit, the pure and correct speech was made a parameter of culturedness and was, thus, turned into a powerful identity symbol of the Brahmanical culture.

Part II: Buddha's Challenge to the Brahmanical Ideology

II.1. Ideology of Refuge in Meaning and Not in Letters

In order to eliminate the ego or obsession for the pure language on part of the people belonging to high castes and classes, the Buddha preached his Dharma in the language of the masses. According to the Mahāyāna tradition, the Buddha used several languages for his teaching. These include various vernaculars of different provinces as well as Sanskrit. His teaching was aimed at the liberation of the entire mankind. Therefore, while teaching he relied on the meaning and not on the expression. The ideology of taking refuge in meaning and not in letters expressed in the Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra (p. 79): "O one of great intelligence! A Bodhisattva, the Great Being, should rely upon the meaning and not upon the letters"[3] This ideology governed the Buddhist attitude towards language. The Buddha challenged the Brahmanic idea of correctness or purity of speech by emphasizing the importance of

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1 *te'surā helayo helaya iti kurvantaḥ parābabhūvuḥ / tasmād brāhmaṇena na mlecchitavai nāpabhāṣitavai / mleccho ha vā eṣa yad apaśabdaḥ / mlecchā mā bhūmety adhyeyaṁ vyākaraṇam /... abhivāde strīvan mā bhūmety adhyeyaṁ vyākaraṇam /* (Mbh I.1.1, p.11-12)

2 Bahulkar 2006: 45

3 *arthapratiśaraṇena mahāmate bodhisattvena mahāsattvena bhavitavyam, na vyañjanapratiśaraṇena/*

purity of intention. According to him, the language endowed with four qualities of being beneficial (*subhāsitam*), being righteous (*dhammam*) being pleasant (*piyam*), and being true (*saccam*) is a well-spoken speech.[1] Commenting on this, Buddhaghosa remarks:

> "The speech endowed with these four qualities should be known as a good speech even if it is a language of the *mlecchas*, or the language of the songs of the maid-servants. On the basis of its being an excellent speech alone, it is regarded to be faultless and free from blame by learned noble men who are seeking well being relying on meaning and not on letters."[2]

This standpoint is in exact opposition to Patañjali's concern for learning grammar in order to avoid being treated as a *mleccha* or a woman.[3]

II.2. Rejection of the Idea of a Single Divine Language

The Buddha opposed the idea of a single sacred language and asked his followers to give up insistence on the provincial dialect and divergence from the general linguistic usage. Explaining this further, the Buddha says:

> "One should not insist on local language, and one should not override normal usage. This is the summary of the exposition of non-conflict ... And how, bhikkhus, does there come to be non-insistence on local language and non-overriding of normal usage? Here, bhikkhus, in different localities they call the same thing a 'dish' ... or a 'basin'. So whatever they call it in such and such a locality, without adhering [to that expression] one speaks accordingly, thinking: 'These venerable ones, it seems, are speaking with reference to this.' This is how there comes to be non-insistence on local language and non-overriding of normal usage".[4]

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[1] See, *Subhāsitasutta, Suttanipāta,* Chapter 3, p. 113.

[2] *imehi catūhi aṅgehi samannāgatā vācā sacepi milakkhubhāsāpariyāpannā ghaṭaceṭikāgītikapariyāpannā vā hoti, tathāpi 'subhāsitā'ti veditabbā / subhāsitattā eva ca anavajjā ca ananuvajjā ca viññūnaṁ atthatthikānaṁ kulaputtānaṁ atthapaṭisaraṇānam, no byañjanapaṭisaraṇānan ti /* (Commentary on the Subhāsitasutta, p. 113)

[3] *te'surā helayo helaya iti kurvantaḥ parābabhūvuḥ / tasmād brāhmaṇena na mlecchitavai nāpabhāṣitavai / mleccho ha vā eṣa yad apaśabdaḥ / mlecchā mā bhūmety adhyeyaṁ vyākaraṇam / ... abhivāde strīvan mā bhūmety adhyeyaṁ vyākaraṇam /* (Mbh I.1.1, p.11-12)

[4] Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli and Bhikkhu Bodhi, 2002, p. 1080, 1084-85.

janapadanirutiiṁ nābhiniveseyya, samaññaṁ nātidhāveyyāti - ayam uddeso araṇavibhaṅgassa / (Majjhima Nikāya, Araṇavibhaṅgasuttam, VRI Vol. 14, p. 279); *kathañca, bhikkhave, janapadaniruttiyā ca anabhiniveso hoti samaññāya ca anatisāro ? idha, bhikkhave, tadevekaccesu janapadesu 'pātī'ti sañjānanti, 'patta'nti sañjānanti ... 'pisīlava'nti sañjānanti / iti yathā yathā naṁ tesu tesu janapadesu sañjānanti 'idaṁ kira me āyasmanto sandhāya voharantī'ti tathā tathā voharati aparāmasam / evaṁ kho, bhikkhave, janapadaniruttiyā ca anabhiniveso hoti, samaññāya ca anatisāro /* (Majjhima Nikāya, Araṇavibhaṅgasuttam, VRI Vol. 14, p. 284)

In the Pali canon of the Theravāda School, we come across a dialogue between the Buddha and two monks of the Brahmin origin. They approached the Buddha with a request saying

> "At the present time, Lord, Bhikkhus differing in name, differing in lineage, differing in birth, differing in family have gone forth (from the world). These (bhikkhus) corrupt the word of the Buddha by (repeating it in) their own dialect. Let us, Lord, put the word of the Buddha after the manner of the Vedas."[1]

The Buddha rejects the proposal saying

> "How can you, O foolish ones, speak thus, saying, "Let us, Lord, put the word of the Buddha after the manner of the Vedas?" This will not conduce, O foolish ones, either to the conversion of the unconverted, or to the increase of the converted; but rather to those who have not been converted being not converted, and to the turning back of those who have been converted."

He then addressed them saying

> "You are not, O Bhikkhus, to put the word of the Buddha after the manner of the Vedas. Whosoever does so shall be guilty of a wrongdoing. I allow you, O Bhikkhus, to learn the word of the Buddha each in his own dialect."

This clearly shows that the Buddha's choice of a popular speech for discoursing was a conscious step taken with the purpose of promoting his teachings among the masses. This liberal attitude of the Buddha towards language resulted in to the spread of Buddhism among different cultures without any trouble. This, in turn, resulted in to a number of Buddhist canons in various languages. As pointed out by Vinītadeva, a Buddhist Pundit of eighth century CE., the Sarvāstivādins used Sanskrit, the Mahāsaṅghikas the Prakrit, the Sammitiyas the Apabhraṃśa and the Sthaviravādins (i.e. Theravādins) Paiśācī".[2] The translatability of the Buddhavacanas gave rise to a number of translated versions of the Canon in Chinese, Khotanese, Tibetan, Mongolian, etc.

Part III. Theravādin's Challenge: A New Dimension

III.1 Challenging the Hegemony of Cosmopolitan Buddhists by Reviving Pali

As it is well known, after the third Buddhist council held in the reign of the Emperor Ashoka, the Buddhist Order split into eighteen sects. Under the patronage of the Emperor Ashoka, his son the Elder Mahāmahinda took the Theravāda Pali canon to Sri Lanka, which later became the centre of the Theravāda School. Till the fourth century CE, Buddhist monks in Sri Lanka mainly used the local Sinhalese language to produce the exegetical literature. During this period, three main centres of Buddhist

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[1] Vinayapiṭaka, Khuddakavatthukkhandhaka, p. 260

[2] Winternitz 1900, p. 217, n. 3

learning emerged in Anurādhapura, the ancient capital of Sri Lanka. The Abhayagiri Vihāra, popularly known as the Uttaravihāra, and the Jetavana Vihāra developed into cosmopolitan centres of Buddhism where many foreign students from the neighbouring countries used to come to receive their training. It is believed that these monasteries made ample use of Sanskrit treatises.[1] On the other hand, the Mahāvihāra remained the orthodox centre of the Theravāda School. The Sri Lankan history informs us that in the 4th century CE, during the reign of Mahāsena, Abhayagiri and Jetavana traditions established their supremacy over the Mahāvihāra tradition and received the royal patronage. With the help of the king, they succeeded in expelling all the Mahāvihāra monks out of Sri Lanka.

In order to counter the Abhayagiri and the Jetavana hegemony, the Mahāvihāra tradition attacked their affinity with Sanskrit. By composing the Dīpavaṃsa, the Pali chronicle of Sri Lanka, it revived Pali as an identity symbol of the orthodox Theravāda School. It then invited Buddhaghosa and entrusted him with the task of translating the Sinhalese commentaries into Pali. On the request of the Mahāvihāra monks, Buddhaghosa composed his famous work Visuddhimagga to counter the Sanskrit treatise called Vimuktimārga belonging to the tradition of the Abhayagiri.

III.2 Theravāda Claim to the Exclusive Nature of Pali

In an attempt to win the authenticity, originality and self-reliance for the tradition, Buddhaghosa interpreted the expression *sakāya niruttiyā* found in the Vinaya passage referred to above, as the Buddha's own dialect viz. Māgadhī i.e. Pali, which is the language of the Theravāda canon and not as one's own dialect.[2] Pali grammarians created indigenous Pali grammars with its ancillary texts in order to put Pali at par with Sanskrit, which has rich grammatical tradition. It is noteworthy that unlike Pali grammars, all the grammars of Prakrits are written in Sanskrit and Prakrit grammarians described Prakrit languages as derived from Sanskrit.

The Pali grammatical tradition propagated that Māgadhī is the root language through which the human beings of the first eon, Brahmā Gods and the enlightened

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1 Cf. Jonathan Walters 2000.

2 W. Geiger has supported Buddhaghosa's interpretation of the phrase. M. Winternitz, however, rejects Geiger's interpretation and agrees with the translation of Rhys Davids and Oldenberg saying "If *Geiger's* explanation were correct, we should also expect that not only the translation into Sanskrit, but also the learning of the word of Buddha in the dialects of the monks of various districts, would have been forbidden. Then again, the stern words attributed to Buddha, in which he rejects the suggestion that the word of Buddha should be translated into the language of the Veda or set in verse after the manner of the Veda, because that would not contribute to the conversion of the unconverted nor increase the number of the converted, are additional evidence that the chief concern was to propagate the word of Buddha as widely as possible, which is only possible if the monks in various districts preach the word of Buddha in languages of those districts". Further he adds: "The translation: "I allow you, O monks, to learn the word of the Buddha each in his own language" also accords well with Majjhimanikāya I.39 (III, pp. 234f., 237) wherein it is said that the "Middle Way" which leads to rest, is for a man not to insist unduly on his own provincial dialect (*janapadanirutti*) and at the same time not to diverge from general linguistic usage". (M. Winternitz, A History of Indian Literature, Vol. II, Appendix II, p. 576-577).

ones speak.[1] Sri Rāhula in his Padasādhanaṭīkā quotes two verses from the Niruttisaṁvaṇṇanā (= Mañjūsā?) stating that Jina has not propounded the Dhamma except in Magadha language.[2] Out of these, the first verse is also quoted by Aggavaṁsa at Saddanīti 924, 45. Thus, taking an orthodox approach, the Theravāda tradition projected Pali as the only authentic language of Buddhism.

Part IV: Challenge of the Buddhist Logicians

IV.1 Acceptance of Sanskrit as a Standard Language of Discourse

As mentioned above, the Sarvāstivāda tradition used Sanskrit for preserving the teaching of the Buddha. The medium of the Mahāyāna Sūtras is also Sanskrit or a Mixed Sanskrit. Great Buddhist poets, Buddhist lexicographers, Buddhist grammarians and logicians composed their works in Classical Sanskrit. This shows that just like their counterparts in the Brahmanical tradition, Buddhist intellectuals accepted Sanskrit as a standard language of intellectual discourse.

IV.2 Dharmakīrti's Rational Arguments against superiority of Sanskrit

In the seventh century, Dharmakīrti, the celebrated author of the Vādanyāya, the text on logic of debate, refuted unreasonable claims of the Sanskrit grammarians about the superiority of the Sanskrit language. According to the Sanskrit grammarians, the science of grammar is essential as it explains Sanskrit i.e. cultured words. Dharmakīrti objects it saying:

> "What is 'being cultured' in case of words? We do not see any (sign of) culturedness such as intellect or learnedness (in them). Nor do these (Sanskrit) words have extreme audibility. Nor do they have any pre-eminence in conveying the meaning. Nor are they the means to religious merit, because demerit is produced even from the Sanskrit words motivating wrong attitudes. Conversely other words (= non-Sanskrit words) also produce merit. The grammarian's announcement that just the proper use of a word gives one the pleasure in Heaven is merely an utterance. The experts of reasoning do not honour such (unfounded) scriptural statements. ... Therefore there is no word which is cultured".[3]

Thus, the unreasonable and intolerable claim of the Sanskrit grammarians that the use of Sanskrit words leads to merit is well rejected on the rational ground.

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1 *sā māgadhī mūlabhāsā narā yāyādikappikā / brahmāno cassutālāpā sambuddhā cāpi bhāsare //* (Rūpasiddhi 60)

2 *dhammo jinena magadhena vinā na vutto / neruttikā ca magadham vibhajanti tasmā // neruttam eva munino vacanānukūlam // iccādaram matimatā karaṇīyametthāti //* (Padasādhanaṭīkā 401, 13-17)

3 Gokhale, 1993, p. 109-110

IV.3 Dharmakīrti's Opposition to accepting culturedness of words as a parameter of learned person

Another equally untenable argument of the Sanskrit grammarians viz. the culturedness of words is a parameter of distinguishing learned people and that it is one of the purposes of learning Sanskrit grammar is also criticised by Dharmakīrti in the following words:

> "What sort of a false conviction they (the 'learned persons') are having then, which does not require any excellence in their qualities? Because, they use only these (= Sanskrit) words and not others! Moreover, there is no direct witness to (the use of) these words on the basis of which we can ascertain that learned persons use only these words and not others. We do not approve of culturedness of even a few words, as we do not see any excess of qualities (in them). Protection of the Vedas is a non-purpose according to the one who is not a follower of their system. And even if there is some excess of qualities (in the Sanskrit words), no effort needs to be made for their explication. Because the particular nature of those words could be justified on some other basis also, like in the case of the words in Prākṛta, Apabhraṁśa, Draviḍa, Āndhra and other languages".[1]

Thus, the use of a particular language cannot become the defining characteristic of learnedness. It should rather be determined by the knowledge one has. Every language is unique in itself. Therefore, assigning of sacredness to one particular language is insensible.

Part V: Buddhist Tantric Rebel

V.1: Tantric Rejection of Discriminative Barriers

A more fierce attack in this connection, however, comes from the Buddhist Tantric tradition. According to the modern historians, this branch of Buddhism flourished in India from 3rd century A.D. up to 11th century A.D.[2] The language of the Buddhist Tantras is supposed to be Sanskrit. However, it is not necessarily the Buddhist Hybrid Sanskrit, it is more irregular. The Tantric masters who composed a number of secondary works belonged to different castes and had different social background. According to the doctrine of the Tantrayāna, the caste, the class, the profession or even the gender cannot become an obstacle in the path of the Buddhahood. Vimalaprabhā (VP), which is the celebrated encyclopaedic commentary on the Kālacakra Tantra (KC), quotes the following verse in this connection:

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1 Gokhale, 1993, p. 110-111

2 Bahulkar, 2006, p. 40

> "Outcastes, flute-makers and so forth, and those who commit the five sins of immediate retribution (*ānantarya*), may become Buddhas in this very life, by pursuing the Mantra conduct."[1]

V.2: Language Purity and Class Consciousness

VP, which was composed around 11th century, unveils social implications of language. As mentioned before, in Indian context, the issue of language is very closely connected with class-consciousness. While justifying the type of Sanskrit used in the Tantra texts, VP comments:

> "In order to remove the obsession for the proper words on part of those arguing in favour of proper words, he (i.e. the author of the Concise KC) relied on the meaning (and deliberately used the faulty construction). (For instance), there are in some verses corrupt forms. In some verses, there is a violation of (a rule of metre namely) *yatibhaṅga*. Somewhere there is a word without the case ending. In some words, letters and vowels are dropped. In some verses, a long vowel is short and a short one is long. Somewhere, the locative case is used for the ablative and the genitive for the dative. ... A yogin should recognize corrupt words such as these and others, by reading the texts. Likewise, I must write this commentary relying on the meaning in order to remove the pride for proper words. Thus, the Buddhas and the Bodhisattvas teach the dharma for the sake of liberation, relying on the meaning, by means of languages of different regions and of different grammatical treatises, in whatever manner so as to remove the pride for family, learning and proper words."[2]

This is a fierce attack on the Vedic tradition according to which, even the slightest mistake in accent can lead to the defeat of the speaker:

> "The word faulty in accent or phoneme wrongly employed does not express its (intended) meaning but kills the host as a thunderbolt of the speech, just as it killed due to the mistake in accent while in uttering the word *Indraśatru*."[3]

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1 *caṇḍālaveṇukārādyāḥ pañcānantaryakāriṇaḥ/*
janmanīhaiva buddhāḥ syur mantracaryānucāriṇaḥ // (VP, Vol. 1, p. 15)

2 *teṣāṃ ca suśabdavādināṃ suśabdagrahavināśāya arthaśaraṇatām āśritya kvacid vṛtte'paśabdaḥ, kvacid vṛtte yatibhaṅgaḥ, kvacid avibhaktikaṃ padam, kvacid varṇasvaralopaḥ, kvacid vṛtte dīrgho hrasvaḥ, hrasvo'pi dīrghaḥ, kvacit pañcamyarthe saptamī, caturthyarthe ṣaṣṭhī, ... evamādayo'nye'pi'paśabdā yoginā'vagantavyā āgamapāṭhād iti/ evaṃ ṭīkāyām api suśabdābhimānanāśāya likhitavyaṃ mayā'rthaśaraṇatām āśrityeti/ atha yena yena prakāreṇa kulavidyāsuśabdābhimānakṣayo bhavati, tena tena prakāreṇārthaśaraṇatām āśritya buddhānāṃ bodhisattvānām dharmadeśanā deśabhāṣāntareṇa śabdaśāstrabhāṣāntareṇa mokṣārtham/* (VP, Vol. 1, p. 29-30)

3 *duṣṭaś śabdas svarato varṇato vā mithyā prayukto na tam artham āha / sa vāgvajro yajamānaṁ hinasti yathendraśatruḥ svarato'parādhāt //*

Here, it is noteworthy that in the Buddhist tradition, even the mantras are open to phonetic translation. We find phonetic translation of mantras in various foreign languages such as Chinese, Tibetan, and Japanese etc. The pronunciation of such translated mantras is not in accordance with their correct Sanskrit pronunciation. Still they are considered to be as effective as their Sanskrit counterparts. Instead of a correct pronunciation of a particular mantra, the amount of purity of mind or intention with which the mantra is chanted is a factor responsible for the efficacy of the mantra. This again is in accordance with the Buddhist ideal of refuge in meaning (*arthapratiśaraṇa*) and importance given to the underlying intention (*cetanā*). Moreover, the use of incorrect Sanskrit by the Tantric masters is not due to their inability to use the standard Sanskrit, but rather was a conscious step to shatter the adherence to the purity of speech. The composition of tantric texts such as Vyaktabhāvānugatatattvasiddhi by the female tantric master Sahajacintā in chaste Sanskrit, are the testimony to the same.[1]

V.3: Non-discriminatory Approach of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas

Further mentioning the practice of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, the VP comments:

> "Those who aim at the path to omniscience do not have a great discrimination between proper and improper words. They always enter the path of the great ones, even through the inferior languages of various countries. The Omniscient One's language is one, in accordance with the inclinations of sentient beings. The language of those who argue about the words and so forth is the other, (it is the one) created in the grammar by the godly snake (Patañjali). A yogin grasps the meaning even from corrupt words and from languages of different regions. Swans extract and drink the milk mixed in water. In the field of ultimate reality, great ones never rely on the letters. What is the use of the scientific term when one understands the meaning from the local expressions? One does not acquire knowledge when instructed discriminating between the improper and the proper words. That which is of limited extent in the world is not the language of the Omniscient One."[2]

In the same vain, VP continues to distinguish Buddhas and Bodhisattvas from other gods on the matter of imparting knowledge to the common people. It says:

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[1] For the specimens of the chaste Sanskrit, see the edited text, V. V. Dviwedi (ed.) 1986?: ??

[2] *śabdāśabdavicāraṇā na mahatī sarvajñamārgārthinām*
nānādeśakubhāṣayā'pi mahatāṃ mārge pravṛttiḥ sadā/
sattvānām adhimukticittavaśataḥ sarvajñabhāṣā parā
anyā vyākaraṇe surāhiracitā śabdādivādārthinām//
apaśabdād artham api yogī gṛhṇāti deśabhāṣātaḥ/
toye payo niviṣṭaṃ pibanti haṃsās tad udhṛtya//
paramārthatattvaviṣaye na vyañjanaśaraṇatā sadā mahatām/
deśasaṃjñābhir arthe jñāte kiṃ śāstraśabdena//
jñānaṃ tad eva bhavati uktā yasyāpaśabdaśabdāḥ syuḥ/
sarvajñasya na bhāṣā yā sā prādeśikī jagati// (VP, Vol. 1, p. 5)

"Here, these Buddhas and Bodhisattvas become teachers of Dharma and conduct the Saṅgītis by means of the utterance of all sentient beings, not (solely) by means of this Sanskrit speech of limited extent, without the omniscient language. Therefore, the language of limited extent that is confined to the category of gods is not (the language) of the Buddhas and the Bodhisattvas, for they teach the Dharma using the utterance of various sentient beings."[1]

V.4: Use of Sanskrit: A Conscious Ploy for Establishing Supremacy

In order to get a correct understanding of the issue of language, one should understand the rationale behind radical arguments put forth by Puṇḍarīka, the author of VP. According to him, using Sanskrit for preserving and imparting knowledge is a well-calculated policy of the high-class people. It was done in order to maintain the overall supremacy of the high class over the low class. It is said:

"Here in the world of mortals, if all people, *śūdras* and so forth, become expert in the Vedas, the Gītā, the Siddhānta, and the science of logic, who will revere (us) the Brāhmaṇas? For the knowledge of science and Dharma will be common to all and all the householder Brāhmaṇas addicted to worldly pleasures would no longer have special qualities. Knowing this, various sages, greedy for wealth, wrote down the Dharma of the Gītā, the Siddhānta and the Purāṇas and so forth in the books, using Sanskrit language. Also, they laid down a rule: 'The Vedas must be studied through the oral recitation'. This rule creates great ignorance in the minds of the childish ones, hence it is considered to be the teaching of the one who is not omniscient. Here, it is said, 'in former times, the *Dharmas* of the Vedas, the Gītā, the Siddhānta and the Purāṇas were not written down in books; they dwelt in the mouths of ascetics. Then, due to the (adverse effect of) the time of five decays (*pañca kaṣāyakāla*), (i.e. in the Kali age), the ascetics wrote them down, because their wisdom was inferior. Here, Buddhists should not praise the teaching into the parochial Dharma of Hari, Hara and so forth; for it gives worldly suffering, produces false pride and is full of the pride in casteism".[2]

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1 *iha na ca te anena prādeśikasaṃskṛtavacanena sarvasattvarutair dharmadeśakāḥ saṅgītikārakā bhavanti, buddhabodhisattvāḥ sarvajñabhāṣayā vinā/ ato devajātipratibaddhā prādeśikā buddhabodhisattvānāṃ na syād iti, nānāsattvarutadharmadeśakatvāt/* (VP, Vol. 1, p. 34)

2 *iha martye yadi sarve manuṣyā vedagītāsiddhāntatarkaśāstravido bhavanti śūdrādayaḥ, tadā brāhmaṇānāṃ ko gauravaṃ kariṣyati, vidyādharmajñānasādhāraṇaparijñānāt, sarveṣāṃ gṛhavāsināṃ saṃsārabhogasaktānāṃ viśeṣaguṇābhāvāt/ iti jñātvā duṣṭa-ṛṣibhir dravyalubdhaiḥ saṃskṛtabhāṣayā gītādisiddhāntapurāṇādayo dharmāḥ pustake likhitāḥ, vedāś ca mukhapāṭhenādhyayanīyā iti niyamaḥ kṛto bālajanānāṃ mahāmohajanaka iti asarvajñadeśanābhiprāyaḥ/ iha pūrvakāle vedagītāsiddhāntapurāṇadharmā na pustake likhitāḥ santi, yatīnāṃ mukhe tiṣṭhanti, tataḥ pañcakaṣāyakālavaśāt pustake likhitāḥ, prajñāhīnatvād yatibhir iti/ iha prādeśikī hariharādīnāṃ dharmadeśanā bauddhair nānumodanīyā sarvāsattvakṛpayā rahitā, saṃsāraduḥkhadāyinī mithyāhaṅkārakāriṇī jātivādābhimāninīti/* (VP, Vol. 1, p. 40-41)

Part VI: Continuing the Challenge in the Modern Era

Inscriptional evidence from the 4th century onwards shows rise in Brahmanical influence. The fact that almost all the inscriptions till the 3rd century A.D. are in some or the other form of Prakrit whereas the later inscriptions favouring Brahmins are in Sanskrit point out at the decline of the popular languages and ascent of Sanskrit in the literary circles in India after that period.[1] This has resulted into the divide between the language for intellectual and popular discourse, which had much negative impact on the social psyche. The Buddhist Tantric revolt against the parochial nature of Sanskrit, which by then was identified with the Brahmanical culture, is a testimony to this fact. Indian Saint Literature of the medieval period, which was composed in the regional dialects, also registered its opposition to the hegemony of a single language. What they were advocating was an equal status for all the languages and predominance of meaning over the letters. The fight to win an equal status for popular languages is still on in different regions of India. An emergence of a number of social movements for this purpose is the testimony to the same. These movements claim that

1. The popular languages are indigenous whereas Sanskrit is a foreign language.
2. Sanskrit was consciously made difficult by Brahmins from the simpler dialects.
3. The Brahmanical propaganda of Sanskrit has been responsible for the decline of popular languages in India.
4. Sanskrit and the cosmopolitan standard languages are working of Brahmanic culture.

These social movements aim at opposing the hegemony of discriminatory Brahmanical ideology.

Dr. B. R. Ambedkar introduced his modern form of Buddhism to the society through his writings and speeches in modern languages such as English and Marathi. The 22 precepts, which he laid down for his followers, were also handed down in the regional language. He did not lay emphasis on any particular linguistic or scriptural tradition. While writing 'The Buddha and His Dhamma', Dr. Ambedkar has drawn upon both Pali as well as Sanskrit Buddhist sources. In his reconstruction of modern Buddhism i.e. the Navayāna, he either omitted or did not emphasize on the mythical, legendary and transcendental aspect of traditional Buddhism in accordance with his scientific and rational approach. His emphasis on the principles of freedom, equality and fraternity inherent in Buddhism provided the much-needed ideological basis for the modern Buddhist society. Dr. Ambedkar's new interpretation of Buddhism finds itself closer to the early Buddhism available in the Pali scriptures. Although the Mahāyānist missionary ideal of a Bodhisattva and the principle of compassion (*karuṇā*) formed the core of Ambedkarite Buddhism, the mythical elements in it are looked upon as the Brahmanised form of Buddhism. As a result, the Ambedkarite modern Buddhist community looks upon Pali as a symbol of revolt against Brahmanism and is trying to project it as the symbol of their identity.

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1 T. W. Rhys Davids, 2005, p. 151

Dr. Ambedkar's writings such as 'Who were the Śūdras?' helped the modern-Buddhist community to regain its lost identity. This can be seen in a very simple linguistic gesture that of naming the new born child. Instead of the old derogatory proper names or names associated with the Brahmanical ideas, the modern Buddhists now prefer to name their child either with secular names or names that are specifically Buddhist. On the basis of the Ambedkarite ideology, the Marathi speaking Buddhist community is developing its modern vocabulary. The use of the Pali word *dhamma* as distinct from Sanskrit *dharma* meaning 'religion', by Dr. Ambedkar is to show the distinct ideology of Buddhism as compared to Hinduism. The Marathi Buddhist community consciously tries to avoid words having reference to supernormal ideas such as *sudaiva* 'good fortune' and *durdaiva* 'misfortune', *naśīb* 'fate'. Instead of using the word *vyāsapīṭh* for a dais, which has reference to the Brahmanical sage Vyāsa, they prefer to use the word *vicāramañca* or *vicārapīṭh* a platform for discussion, which is secular in nature. The use of the Pali address terms such as *āyuṣmān* and *āyuṣmatī* instead of *Śrī* and *Śrīmatī* (Mr. and Ms.) is another example showing the distinct identity of the Buddhist community.

Part VII: Concluding Remarks

Language is so deeply rooted in human culture that it touches each and every aspect of the human life. Besides conveying meaning it also serves as a means of cultural identity. The Buddhist response to the supremacy of Sanskrit as a sacred language is twofold: The Theravāda response is more conservative as it simply brings forth an alternative sacred language giving an identity to the Theravāda Buddhists. The approach of Buddhist logicians and especially the Tantrayāna approach on the other hand are more rational and progressive. Here it should be understood that a large number of Buddhist writers accepted Sanskrit as a standard medium for intellectual discourses, but strongly opposed the tendency of creating an aura of divinity or mysticism around it. They very closely examined the logical inconsistencies in the Brahmanical ideological standpoint and have brought out unjust social designs of the priestly community.

Thus, the Buddhist challenge to Bramhanical language identity is in accordance with and motivated by its ideology. Although, some times the ideological position is compromised in order to meet the demand of situation, the overall quest for asserting the distinct identity is in accordance with the Buddhist ideology, and therefore worth appreciating.

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